

Developing soccer talent among America's youth

By Mark Franek
and Bill Kashatus

When U.S. Soccer president Alan Rothenberg recently admitted that the national team would probably "not make it out of the first round" of their World Cup competition against Germany, Iran and Yugoslavia, he confirmed what so many of us who coach at the junior level already knew.

Producing world-class players depends upon a dramatic improvement in the quality of player development in this country.

Currently the responsibility for developing world-class soccer players in the United States rests with the Olympic Development Program. While the program has managed to cultivate some impressive players, the regional coaches who direct it tend to identify midfielders as the best "all-around players," ignoring position-specific qualities. The pure goal scorer or the exceptional defensive marker often fails to be selected because of deficiencies in other areas. But in Europe, those types of players are the ones who will ensure the success of the top teams.

Recently, U.S. Soccer unveiled a \$50 million program that will replace the current system. Designed to identify the best players at a much younger age and develop them into an under-17 world championship team by 2005, it's hoped that this team will have the capability to capture Olympic gold by 2008 and win the World Cup by 2010. It is a step in the right direction if the coaches don't fall victim to the same biases in player selection that plagued the ODP.

In Europe and Latin America, soccer is part of the culture. Each town has an organized team with a feeder system that is almost entirely supported by local and national businesses. Player development is emphasized and the reputation of any youth team is based on how many players make it to the next level. In the United States, however, parents shoulder the operating expenses at the youth level. Winning championships — rather than developing ability — holds more of an appeal for them and, by necessity, for the coaches if they hope to secure the

funding to continue those programs.

Consider how much more talented our players would be, for example, if the youth clubs focused more on developing the kind of playing ability that could secure a college scholarship. But the economics are only part of the problem.

There is a sustained commitment to soccer in Europe and Latin America that is reinforced by unrestricted competition. The best players turn pro in their late teens. They train twice a day, five or six days a week, nine months out of the year. They are encouraged to compete for more than one team in order to develop their playing skills. They play with a passion that defines their skill and their identity as an athlete.

In the United States, that kind of passion can only be seen in basketball or football. It is largely missing in soccer. That is not to say that American players are deficient in terms of skill, but that soccer does not define their lives as athletes. In fact, very few train for nine months of the year. State high school federations, as well as the NCAA, prevent their players from developing their skills in the off-season. Those rules operate on the assumption that unrestricted competition will allow some teams to gain an unfair advantage, or, in the case of probound college players, an ethical violation of accepting money for their performance. While some restrictions are understandable, we could give our soccer players a better opportunity to develop their abilities by modifying or eliminating others.

If the United States is to develop world-class soccer talent, then it must begin by emphasizing skill at the youth level, eliminating many of the restrictions that exist at the high school and college levels, and securing the corporate dollars to sponsor an effective nationwide system of identifying and cultivating the top talent that exists. Together with America's will to succeed through hard work and risk-taking, these measures can make the United States a formidable competitor in the international arena, rather than the third-world soccer nation we are today.

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COMMENTARY